Holyoke students in grades 7-12 will experience an eye-opening and most likely emotional day Wednesday-Thursday, Sept. 5-6.

This will be the second time the Challenge Day program has visited Holyoke.

Six years ago, the Holyoke FCCLA chapter helped bring the program to students. With it falling so close to the beginning of the school year this year, the program is being coordinated by Holyoke JR/SR High.

The Challenge Day mission is to provide youth and their communities with experiential programs that demonstrate the possibility of love and connection through the celebration of diversity, truth and full expression.

Holyoke students in grades 7-9 will experience the program Wednesday, Sept. 5 while grades 10-12 will attend Thursday, Sept. 6.

Principal Susan Ortner said parent letters were set to go out by Tuesday and are to be returned before students can participate in Challenge Day.

Holyoke School District has conducted a district perception survey for the last three years. Ortner said there is a question that deals with students feeling safe at school and it comes back at about a 30 percent dissatisfaction. She also said there is one dealing with “are students kind to each other?”

“Challenge Day is a way to help us boost those numbers in a positive direction,” Ortner said. She also mentioned their district goal about fostering a climate of respect comes into play.

Staff members will serve as adult facilitators this go around. Six years ago, community

members were sought to help with the program. Ortner said by using staff members, they hope to help boost that respect within the school.

Challenge Days are powerful, high-energy programs in which youth and adult participants are guided through a series of learning processes. The overall goals of the program are to increase personal power and self-esteem, to shift dangerous peer pressure to positive peer support and to eliminate the acceptability of teasing, violence and all forms of oppression.

Challenge Day programs are designed to unite the members of the school and to empower them to carry the themes of the program throughout the year. Challenge Days successfully address the issues of violence, teasing, social oppression, racism, harassment, conflict management, suicide, peer pressure, alcohol and drugs.

“It’ll be an emotional and really powerful day,” Ortner said.

During the program, youth are given several opportunities to speak out about what’s really going on for them and what they need from one another.

While the program focuses primarily on global and community issues and concerns, individual students can and often do share personal difficulties and experiences with the group.

The process of sharing is often both empowering and emotional. For this reason, it is important students be aware that while confidentiality is one of the primary norms for program participation, they can never guarantee confidentiality on a large group level following the day.

Adult leaders and faculty will remind participants of the importance of confidentiality throughout the program.

At the conclusion of the program, the majority of youth leave feeling bonded, empowered and committed to making a positive difference.

In addition to numerous awards, Challenge Day has been featured on Oprah, Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul and the Emmy Award-winning documentary, Teen Files: Surviving High School.

“It’s an amazing program,” Ortner said. “It’ll be a day we really bond as a school.”

The Challenge Day program will begin at 8:15 a.m. each day and conclude around 3 p.m.

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